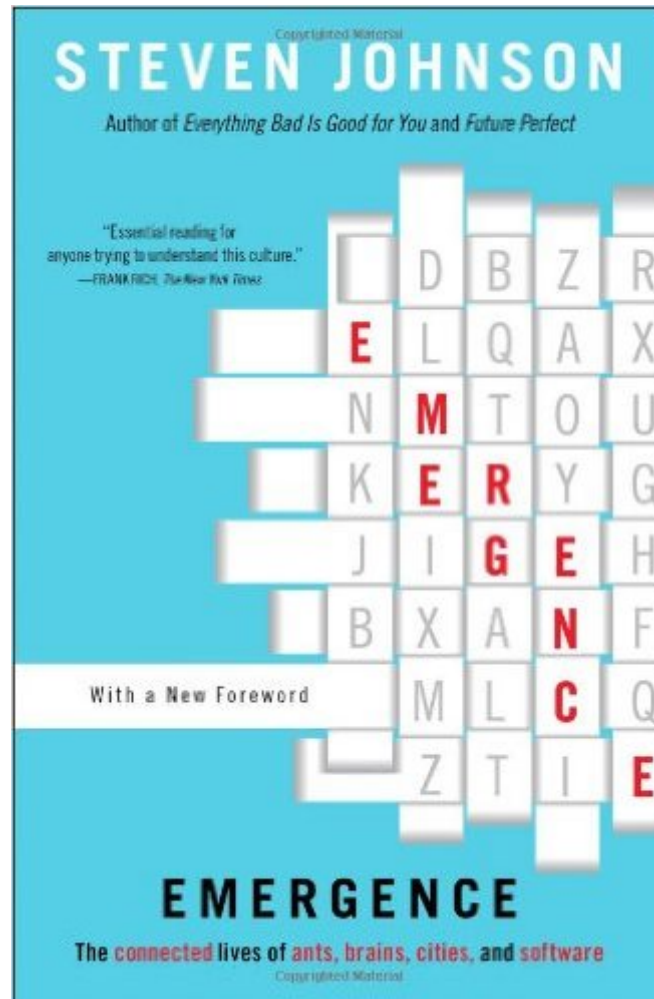


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Emergence: The Connected Lives Of Ants, Brains, Cities, And Software



Synopsis

In the tradition of *Being Digital* and *The Tipping Point*, Steven Johnson, acclaimed as a "cultural critic with a poet's heart" (*The Village Voice*), takes readers on an eye-opening journey through emergence theory and its applications. A NEW YORK TIMES NOTABLE BOOK, A VOICE LITERARY SUPPLEMENT TOP 25 FAVORITE BOOKS OF THE YEAR, AN ESQUIRE MAGAZINE BEST BOOK OF THE YEAR. Explaining why the whole is sometimes smarter than the sum of its parts, Johnson presents surprising examples of feedback, self-organization, and adaptive learning. How does a lively neighborhood evolve out of a disconnected group of shopkeepers, bartenders, and real estate developers? How does a media event take on a life of its own? How will new software programs create an intelligent World Wide Web? In the coming years, the power of self-organization -- coupled with the connective technology of the Internet -- will usher in a revolution every bit as significant as the introduction of electricity. Provocative and engaging, *Emergence* puts you on the front lines of this exciting upheaval in science and thought.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

If you see an ant, you pay it little attention. It's the lines of ants that are really fascinating, and the colonies that really get things done. An ant by itself is not only a speck, it is a humble one, capable of little. It isn't just a matter of getting a lot of ants together so that by sheer numbers they multiply what one ant can do. Ants organize. They communicate. They have tasks, they assign workers, they shift assignments as old jobs get done and new ones come up. We have tried to understand this sort of organization in our own way. To get such things done ourselves, we would have to have

a leader and subleaders, and in trying to understand ants, we even attributed to the queen of the ant colony a sort of CEO status. She isn't, of course; she is an egg-laying machine, but she is deep in the darkest parts of the colony, and has no idea about what her workers are doing or how to respond to quality assurance suggestions. She is not the chief of the bureaucracy of the ant colony. Something else is. Who is giving the orders? No one. The ants are self-organizing, according to Steven Johnson, whose bright book *Emergence: The Connected Lives of Ants, Brains, Cities, and Software* (Scribner) is obviously not just about ants. Ants are just an easy example. Johnson's book is full of satisfying analogies. Take your brain, for instance. Those neurons don't know anything. Each one is capable of firing when stimulated, and that's about it. "No individual neuron is sentient," Johnson writes, "and yet somehow the union of billions of neurons creates self-awareness."

Steven Johnson's "Emergence: The Connected Lives of Ants, Brains, Cities, and Software" (Scribner, New York, 2001), is a very bad book, shallow, careless, and disappointing. I was lured by its nominal subject, which interests me greatly, and now I'm sorry I bought it. Mr. Johnson is a young- very young- video gamer who has managed to parlay a superficial acquaintance with the vocabulary of modern science into a series of trendy popular books, incomprehensibly praised by such authorities as Steven Pinker and Esther Dyson. The book opens with a fraudulent pictorial simile, juxtaposing a side view of the human brain and a map of Hamburg ca. 1850. Indeed they do resemble each other, and the reader is supposed to infer (with no help from Johnson) that the resemblance arises from the operation of similar governing principles. Quite apart from the validity of this conclusion, it apparently does not trouble Johnson that the brain is three-dimensional and the city map is essentially two-dimensional, or that the comparison would fail if a frontal view of the brain had been chosen, or if Paris or El Paso or Denver had been chosen instead of Hamburg. It gets worse. At the most fundamental level, after reading the book I find it impossible to say what the author means by "emergence", his nominal title. When he discusses ant colonies it appears to mean swarm intelligence; when he discusses video games it appears to mean interactive software; at still other places it appears to mean whatever recent developments in the realm of computers or biophysics or city planning that he approves of. Moreover, he appears to be totally ignorant of all science and mathematics that preceded his own adolescence.

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Cities and Complexity: Understanding Cities with Cellular Automata, Agent-Based Models, and Fractals (MIT Press)

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